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## Could it be another SoHo?

Arts plan: Developer crafts proposal to turn an area of Allentown into studios, galleries.

By Arlene Martínez | Of The Morning Call  
August 24, 2008



**Rafael Canizares, poses in his studio in the Silk Mill located at 930 N. 4th St. in Allentown. Canizares hopes to see the "creative class" help rejuvenate the city. (April Bartholomew/TMC / August 22, 2008)**

**SoHo:** The hipster's abbreviation for the South of Houston neighborhood in New York City that came to life in the 1960s when cheap living cropped up in large industrial places, creating a haven for the day's artists.

**NoTi** (pronounced No Tie): What could happen if SoHo were to come to an Allentown neighborhood north of Tilghman and breathe new artistic life into a community whose light has been barely flickering.

The concept of a thriving SoHo-like neighborhood -- funky, artsy, Bohemian, anti-yuppie -- is likely years away for the Queen City. But a New York developer who successfully turned a part of Yonkers into something similar has his eye on Allentown. He sees the mostly abandoned former cigar factory on the 700 block of N. Fourth Street as the perfect spot for 45 artist studios and a gallery.

To Allentown art enthusiasts eager to use members of the "creative class" to help rejuvenate the city, developer George Huang's proposal is the perfect complement to what they say is a burgeoning arts community.

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**Rafael Canizares** Photo

A few years ago, Mansour Mansour bought an old sewing factory at 435 Green St., near Penn Street in Allentown. An artist himself, Mansour liked the idea of bringing creative minds together, figuring they'd feed off one another. He named it Green Street Dreams.

The prospect of so many artists just blocks away would only enhance the quality of work of the dozen in his building, he said.

"We are here, and we feel a little funny. We need some support," said Mansour, a Syrian native who has been in the Lehigh Valley for 15

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SoHo's artists live and work in the loft spaces of that Manhattan neighborhood. But neither Mansour nor Huang's potential project would be livable studio space.

Joseph Skrapits, chairman of the Allentown Arts Commission, thinks that's a good thing.

"You create affordable work spaces for artists. That gives them an incentive to buy something and then walk to work since we have very affordable housing and attractive housing close to these buildings," he said.

What excites advocates is the movement has so far been organic in nature, with a handful of artists working toward getting a bigger audience.

A group of local artists who call themselves the Allentown Chen-Arts Group have met several times in the past months. Their hope is to find places to show throughout the Lehigh Valley.

Rafael Canizares has rented space in the former Silkwerks building for eight years. His large space gives him plenty of room to develop the ceramic sculptures in which he specializes.

He has great expectations, even as he acknowledges it could take up to a decade for "NoTi" to become a flourishing arts district.

The gallery component of Huang's plan most intrigues Canizares.

"The more venues we have, the greater the impact the arts are going to have on the city," Canizares said. "I think it's going to create a synergy around the arts but also just bringing artists together is an amazing thing."

On Aug. 18, the Allentown Zoning Heard Board approved a variance that cleared the way for Huang's project to move forward.

After the meeting, Skrapits excitedly sent out an e-mail, saying: "I think this will be a game-changer as far as Allentown's arts and cultural development is concerned. ... We can now begin to envision and work toward an entire creative arts district on the near north side -- NoTi (north of Tilghman)."

Attracting professionals to live in Allentown while enhancing the city's culture has been a priority for city officials. It helped drive the arts district downtown, where an ArtsWalk and Arts Park in recent years joined Symphony Hall, [Allentown Art Museum](#) and the Baum School of Art.

Having strong arts offerings translates to city dollars, said Randall Forte, executive director of the Lehigh Valley Arts Council.

"Anytime you have collection of arts businesses, art studios in one area, it tends to create a synergy and starts to percolate and impact the neighborhood in a positive way," Forte said.

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